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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet explains the importance of geography in the curriculum of primary, middle, and secondary schools. The pamphlet is intended for education decision-makers and advocates the importance of supporting geography education. The article explains what geography is, relates how U.S. students compare to students in other nations in geographic knowledge, presents reasons why geography is important in helping students understand their world, and suggests ways to improve geography teaching. (EH)

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The Importance of Geography in the School Curriculum

Ruth I. Shirey

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National Council
for
Geographic Education

National Council *for* Geographic Education

The Importance of Geography in the School Curriculum

Dear Education Decision-maker:

This pamphlet explains the importance of geography in the curriculum of primary, middle, and secondary schools. Its goals are two-fold: (1) to convince education decision-makers such as you of the importance of supporting geography education and (2) to provide some ideas about how the first goal might be accomplished.

Since this pamphlet is intended for decision-makers working in a wide variety of settings, not all of the arguments for geography instruction may apply to your situation, and not all of the suggestions for promoting the teaching of geography will be appropriate. Nevertheless, we believe that the information contained in this document should aid you in initiating or improving geography instruction within your jurisdiction.

The members of the National Council for Geographic Education welcome your involvement in stimulating more and better geography teaching and learning. We believe that geography education is important for our students and for our future. We invite you to contact the NCGE if we can support efforts to improve your geography curriculum and instructional program.

Sincerely,

Ruth I. Shirey

Ruth I. Shirey
Executive Director

What is geography?

- **For many people geography means knowing where places are.** It is true that knowing where places are and something of their characteristics is important, just as knowing the alphabet is important for reading or the multiplication tables for arithmetic; but geography involves far more. Geography is the study of places on Earth and their relationship with each other. Often the study of geography begins with one's home community and expands as a person gains greater experience. Thus, geography provides a conceptual link for children between home, school, and the world beyond. Geographers study how people interact with the environment and with each other from place to place and they classify Earth into regions in order to draw generalizations about the complex world in which we live. Because it deals with where and how people live, geography is rich in material that relates to international understanding, multi-cultural concerns, and environmental education.
- The tools of geography help us understand places. The tool most identified with geographers is the map, but they also use different kinds of statistical information, photographs and images of many kinds, and a wide variety of data collected by other methods. They also rely upon their own observations and those of others found in such sources as descriptive geography texts, histories, diaries, and journals.

U.S. students know less geography than students in other countries

- Surveys show that United States students' geography knowledge ranks far below students in such countries as Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. Even worse, geographical knowledge has declined over the years so now many children cannot read maps or locate states, cities, or important physical features, even in the United States. This lack of geographical knowledge is more than an embarrassment; it is a threat to our country's status as a world leader.

Geography helps us understand the world

Geography teaches students important skills

- Through the study of geography students learn to read maps and interpret information at geographical scales from local to global. They are able to use data from maps, tables, graphs, and text to recognize patterns and solve problems. Students also can integrate concepts from many different areas of science, social science, and the humanities, and apply critical thinking to understanding and dealing with current issues of local, national, and international importance.

Geography helps students learn about the world

- Knowing something about where places are and what they are like is important. As the last "superpower" and a major player in international affairs, the United States needs citizens who have basic knowledge of other parts of the world as well as our own country. We also need to understand regional relationships and the role the United States plays in them.

Geography contributes to international understanding

- The world's economies are increasingly linked into an international network of trade and exchange. If our competitors know more about us than we do about them, they have an advantage in serving our markets and negotiating trade agreements, and we are placed at a disadvantage in reaching their markets. Well-planned geography education at all grade levels will help to make us more aware of other countries and cultures and prepare our students to take their place in the world.

Geography helps us understand our own country

Geography and citizenship

- Knowledge of geography helps us be better citizens. Through geography we learn to locate important events. We can understand the relationship between geography and national or international policies and we can use geographical knowledge to make informed decisions regarding the best use of the nation's resources. Finally, geographic knowledge helps us to ask important questions about policies that lead to changes in landscape and land use. Geographically informed students will be effective leaders for our country.

Geography and economics

- There is a close relationship between geography and economics. The location of natural resources, the shape of transportation networks and the technology they use, the level of industrialization or energy production, and many other geographical factors influence the kind of economy a country or region will have. Trade patterns are fundamental elements of both geography and economics.

Geography and history

- Geography provides important clues to the past. Landforms and climate are related to migration patterns, land use, and the rise and fall of civilizations. How people use the land also has a strong bearing on the economic progress of countries and regions. Thus, knowing what the landscape was like in the past is important for understanding historical processes; as is knowing who lived in a place, how they lived, and how they used the land.

Geography and the environment

- Many human geographers examine the relationship between humans and the environments in which they live and physical geographers are concerned with how natural systems work. Geographers conduct research to understand the impact of environmental factors on human individual and group behavior, to identify the ways in which humans change the environments in which they live, and to determine the long-term environmental impacts of social processes such as population growth and technological development. These are key issues for determining government and private sector environmental policies with which an educated citizenry should be acquainted.

Ways to improve geography teaching

Implement Geography for Life: National Geography Standards

- Concern over lack of geographical knowledge in the United States has been expressed by all branches of government. Geography is included among the core subjects in the Goals 2000 program to improve United States education. As a result of this initiative and others, national geography standards have been published and are being voluntarily adopted around the country. These geography standards are benchmarks against which the content of geography courses at all grade levels can be measured. Standards will affect the education of all children in the United States, and they should be a part of your school's program.

Encourage geography learning

- Nation-wide geography contests such as the NCGE's National Geography Olympiad and the National Geographic Society Geography Bee offer geography students the opportunity for recognition. Students in your school(s) should have an opportunity to participate in these contests.

- Work with teachers to make geography an integral part of the total educational package. Encourage the use of suitable maps and the introduction of applicable geography concepts in history, economics, government, biology, and other classes where they can enhance students' learning opportunities.
- Encourage school decision-makers and teachers to set aside certain days or weeks for the study of specific geographic areas such as a state or region within the United States or a foreign country or region. Activities might include preparing posters and maps, presenting facts about the area, or bringing typical articles such as clothing, handicrafts, or foods to school. Foreign-born students can be encouraged to present information about their homeland. Outside speakers could be invited to talk about certain countries, as well.

Hire qualified teachers

- Look for teachers with formal geography training; do not assume that any teacher can pick up enough geography to teach the subject. Teachers with training in geography should know their subject and should be enthusiastic about teaching it. Would you hire a teacher with no math courses to teach math? Why hire teachers without geography training to teach geography?

Provide opportunities for teachers to upgrade their geography knowledge

- There are many ways for teachers with a limited geography background to improve their knowledge or for those with training to stay abreast of new developments. Every state has a state geographic alliance, which produces teaching materials and holds meetings, training sessions, and summer institutes on geography teaching. Encourage geography teachers to become affiliated with the state geographic alliance (alliance coordinators and addresses may be obtained from N.G.S., Geography Education Program, 1145 17th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-4688). Encourage teachers to enroll for summer or evening courses in geography at a local university, college, or community college. Make sure school libraries subscribe to important publications for geography education such as NCGE's *Journal of Geography* and the Pathways in Geography Series.

Insure that geography classes have proper equipment

- All classrooms where geography is taught should be equipped with up-to-date globes, atlases, and wall maps of the world, the United States, and world regions or continents. Simple maps and atlases will do for lower grades, but middle and high school classrooms require more advanced materials. Depending on the grade level and the type of geography being taught, flat maps of various types such as United States Geological Survey topographic quadrangles may be needed. A modern geography classroom should also be equipped with at least one computer with appropriate programs. For lower grades, this might include simple computer geography games and map programs. For upper grade levels more complex programs with mapping and database manipulation functions and network access are needed.

Make learning geography interesting and exciting for students

- Encourage teachers to use creative approaches to teaching geography. Use examples from the school area in teaching and for student projects. For example, geography students might make maps showing local flood plain areas, indicating the directions in which the city or town is growing or showing land uses along highways or major streets as an aid to understanding how cities develop. In class, games can be created to help students learn to identify places on a map or to identify areas that are in the news such as Japan, Mexico, or Bosnia. Hold a school district or regional geography fair to encourage students to explore geographical topics in depth.

To obtain additional information about geography education

- Improving geography knowledge is important to our nation and its future. We hope that you agree and that this brochure has provided some ideas to help you achieve this goal. We encourage you to contact the NCGE to obtain additional information on the discipline of geography or on geography education. *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards-1994* and other publications are available from the NCGE at the address indicated below.

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